

The Model Prayer

This is commonly referred to as “The Lord’s prayer”. But be aware that this isn’t a story about Jesus praying. In Luke’s account of this prayer He gives it in response to a request that He teach us how to pray.

Lk 11:1 It happened that while Jesus was praying in a certain place, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, “Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples.”

This is a rather curious request. Prayer has been a part of Jewish life from Genesis on. Many Jewish prayers today are recitations of formal prayers and it’s likely that was true in Jesus’ time as well. That may be why John taught his disciples to pray, perhaps to pray from the heart.

It is possible that Jesus did the same thing here. He may not have intended this to be memorized and recited. While there is nothing wrong with doing that, there is more to this prayer than just the words.

For our purposes we will use Matthew’s recording of this prayer found just after the sermon on the mount in **Matthew 6:9-13**.

Our Father

While there are a few passages in the Old Testament regarding God being the Father of Israel (Ex. 4:23-23, Deut. 14:1, 32:6, Is. 43:6, 63:16, Jer. 3:4, 31:9, Hos. 11:1-4, Mal. 1:6, 2:10) it is a relationship to the nation, not to individuals. In His Ministry Jesus repeatedly refers to God as His Father, but also reminds us that we are all individually His children. Paul expresses this idea as adoption in Rom 8:15-17, 23; Gal. 4:5 and Eph. 1:5.

...who is in Heaven

The word heaven in both Greek (ouranos) is translated as sky, air and heaven. Translators determine by context which English word is to be used. In this context however it is clearly a reference to the abode of God. It’s not uncommon for words to be used in this way and it can lead to confusion in translation. It is always wise to mentally substitute “sky” where the English word “heaven” is used. Presuming that “ouranos” means God’s abode isn’t always obvious, in this instance it is safe. But what is the point? From His vantage He can see and know what we are doing, what is happening and where all this is going. He sees us.

...Hallowed be Your name.

The word “Hallowed” is a translation of the Greek verb “hagiazō”, to make holy, consecrate, sanctify. This is not a request that His name be kept holy, it is a commitment to make it holy, to honor His name. The Greek word translated as “name” (onoma) can also mean “authority” or “cause”. So when we pray this, we commit ourselves to the sanctity of His authority and to consecrate His cause.

Your kingdom come.

Jesus often mentioned that the Kingdom was at hand, coming soon or even “upon you”. The eminence of the kingdom was explicit. This word though can also mean “authority” and is sometimes translated as “reign”. It seems redundant to pray that something He has declared He will do actually happen. Acknowledging His authority over us however is at once an act of submission, humility and gratitude.

Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

There is a great dichotomy when it comes to God’s will. In the greater sense His will will be done.

But we also know that His will is not always done in our own lives. It would be facetious to pray that He is sovereign, He already is. Praying that we do His will is just asking for the help that we need. In other words, may we individually and corporately effect His will here in the same way that the heavenly host does.

Be careful not to wish that He impose his will on everyone. While that might be attractive, He isn't going to do that. It's fair to acknowledge that the world would be a better place if everyone was committed to goodness, kindness and mercy. It's likely more practical to pray for His help and guidance in doing His will in our own lives.

Give us this day our daily bread.

We actually don't know what kind of bread He said. The word translated as "daily" (Gr. epiousios) occurs only once in the New Testament and only one other time in Greek literature. Based on the presumptive etymology it likely means "necessary for subsistence", but also possibly "tomorrow's". Read this way we find ourselves asking for tomorrow's bread today, a prayer not only for subsistence but security. This is also an acknowledgment that we are wholly dependent on Him for our subsistence and our security.

And forgive us our debts

The literal meaning of "forgive" here is to send away, to do away with. Debt is exactly what it sounds like. It encompasses not only our sins, but the enormous debt of gratitude that we owe. It includes the fact that we are indebted to Him for our very existence. We have no possible way to repay any tiny portion of this debt. Our only hope, our only possibility is that He will eliminate it.

...as we also have forgiven our debtors.

As desperately as we need forgiveness, it is the one thing that we often cannot give others. But in a greater sense we can't hope, expect or even believe in forgiveness if we are unwilling to forgive. It's more than hypocrisy, although it is certainly that. It's a denial that forgiveness is available.

We all struggle with this at least at times. Sometimes the hurt is so great, the act so monstrous, the sin so egregious, the consequences so grave that forgiveness seems almost improper. It's difficult to remember, to acknowledge that what we have been forgiven is equivalent and perhaps even much greater than the most horrific sins committed against us or those we love. We like the idea of comparative sins and of course we always look good in those comparisons. But God doesn't compare sins, He just forgives them.

And do not lead us into temptation

James tells us that God doesn't himself tempt anyone (James 1:13). Perhaps He does lead us to places or situations where temptations will occur, but I think that this plea is rather a request to lead us away from all that. The trick of course is to follow that lead.

...but deliver us from evil.

This can also be translated as "deliver us from the evil one". We all know that evil is ubiquitous, and if we are honest we must admit that some of it is attractive to us. The evil here is not necessarily the evil in the world, and the evil one may be me. We are weak, we need His divine help and grace to deliver us not only from the evil in the world, but also from the evil that comes from inside. It is a request that He help us in our quest for repentance and discipleship.

Note that up to this point the prayer contains seven elements. That is never a coincidence in Scripture. Seven was considered the perfect number, the sum of the number of God (3) and the number of man (4). It's a prime number, it's indivisible. It was symbolic of completeness.

Four are about the wisdom, righteousness and sovereignty of God. Three are about the weakness of men. This prayer is a call to humility, gratitude and wonder of all that He is, all that He has done, and all that He continues to do. It is also an acknowledgment that we do not deserve any of it.

The final phrase is not found in the earliest manuscripts. It conveys a profound truth, but rather intrudes on the symmetry of what we presume Jesus taught.

[For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.]

The kingdom is His, it is a profound grace that He has invited us into it. Let's choose to be good citizens of it. He is powerful, we are powerless. Without Him, His mercy and His grace we would not be able to even feed ourselves. We are wholly dependent on Him. All glory to the Father, and to the Lamb that was slain.

So be it.

So following His example, pray this with me.

Father, thank you for adopting us and granting us the privilege to call you by that name. You are above all, You see all, see us now. May we always keep your name holy, completely submit ourselves to Your authority and ever support, proclaim and follow Your cause.

We know that Your kingdom is eternal, thank You for establishing it, thank you for incorporating us into it, help us to be good citizens of that kingdom and to work diligently for it's good.

Father we know that Your will for this world and next must and will be done. We also acknowledge that Your will is not always done in our own lives. We submit ourselves to Your will and ask for divine guidance and help in your will with all the fervor and wholeness that it is in Heaven.

We know that we are wholly dependent on You for our existence, our livelihoods, our survival and we trust in You alone for our security. Help us in our insecurity.

We owe not only our existence, subsistence and salvation to you. And we know that is a debt that we can never hope to repay. Thank you for making this enormous debt simply vanish. Help us to see that we can't accept that gift if we can't find it within ourselves to forgive the meagerly debts owed us.

Father we know that we are quick to follow our own desires. Help us to learn to subvert those to Your ways, Your righteousness. Help us to follow You rather than those things that tempt us. We know that evil is all around us and that we are sometimes attracted to it. Keep us from our own weakness.

And all together let's pray:

Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Amen.